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Babylon: Myth and Reality at the Louvre, Paris
Exhibition Review

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Last year, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, the Louvre, and the British Museum each hosted the exhibition *Babylon: Myth and Reality*. This project was brought together with the holdings of the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Vorderasiatisches Museum of Berlin and aimed to present both the archaeological discoveries made in the city and the contrasting perceptions of this legendary place by later generations.¹ This review refers only to the exhibit's arrangement and content as displayed at the Louvre.

Babylon: Myth and Reality was divided into two sections: the first dealt with the history and archaeology of the city, and the second exhibited later works produced around the theme of Babylon.

The first half of the exhibit followed a clear historical thread. The visitor proceeded through the exhibit by following long explanatory panels which gave a factual outline of Babylonian political, social and economic history. These panels were written in very small characters (since fitting a brief factual history of one of the world's greatest civilisation in three languages on a few museum panels is no easy task I would imagine!) against a sand-coloured and uneven background. As the exhibit was also very dark, this resulted in people queuing at the panels in order to read them, while they quickly passed in front of the objects on display.

The exception was made for some objects which were displayed in such a way as to make them appear as more important than others. The organisers

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http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/future_exhibitions/babylon/exhibition_overview.aspx

made sure that their key pieces were easily identifiable by giving them an individual glass case and separate explanatory panels. This resulted in a dual approach to the exhibit: on the one hand were the objects which belonged to what we might term 'History' (such as the *Mappi Mundi* or the Hammurabi Codex), that is to say, objects of political or cultural value. These are the famous objects of Babylon, the ones museums fought for, and that visitors especially came to see. On the other hand were the objects which detailed the Babylonians' daily life (which visitors, including myself, obediently did not concentrate on). This basic structure was further exposed on the Louvre website for the exhibition which was divided between the chronological political history and the themes usually attached to the Babylonians (literature, sciences, agriculture, etc).² This was therefore the first level of understanding advertised by the curators: bringing the big history together with the small one, or rather putting the myth back into its historical context.

This historical approach seemed fairly new for the Louvre, which is primarily an art museum, and is arranged as such. The décor and setting of the exhibit also looked very modern compared to the Louvre's usual golden rococo painting frames, white lighting, and exceptionally high ceilings: the rooms were small and very dark with clever lighting and low ceilings, as if we were entering an ancient mystic temple, and the display cases were simplistic and barely noticeable over the objects. A drop of Anglo-Saxon design in the temple of French Grandeur: the most sought after look in Paris museums these days.

Nevertheless, I found the first half of the exhibit very traditional in its structure and content. Its chronological structure started from the humble beginnings to the grandiose climax of Babylonian art exemplified by the blue walls of the Ishtar Gate. The room presenting the walls of the Gate was the largest one, and also the last before the second half of the exhibition. This room also included the final panel, located by the exit door, which discussed the Persian and Greek domination of Babylon – as if the blue walls were the last thing the

² <http://mini-site.louvre.fr/babylone/FR/html/1.4.2.html>

Babylonians produced, and that the city ceased to exist (or be interesting) after its foreign occupations. It is significant to see that the first half of the exhibition, which was meant to show the reality, chose to focus on the precise period of time that the myths described. Although the intended focus of the exhibition was indeed to compare myth and reality of one place at one certain time, it could have been fruitful to demonstrate that Babylon was part of a longer and more diverse history. Similarly, the geographical focus was also restricted to what the myths had depicted in later ages. Babylon was treated as a city-civilisation in itself, with no connexions other than commercial or military (and even so very briefly) with its surrounding worlds. As a result, the visitor left the exhibition with no clear knowledge of the contexts in which Babylonian civilisation emerged, developed and evolved. In conclusion, the chronological and geographical focus of the exhibition could have been tailored around the bigger picture of the historical and geographical contexts of the ancient city of Babylon, rather than sticking to the limits set up by later representations of the city (exhibited in the second half of the exhibition).

The second section of the exhibition dealt with later representations of Babylon, from the Bible to medieval scholars, eighteenth-century antiquarians and modern art. This was, I found, a very refreshing approach, to study a place in relation to its interpretations: the exhibition started by presenting the archaeological reality and then dealt at the end with the previous discourses on Babylon, completely separately from the first half of the exhibit. In fact, this part of the exhibition also followed a chronological structure, but there were no explanatory panels to link them to their historical context of production, contrary to the first half of the exhibition. Moreover, the layout of the exhibition (a succession of rooms) did not allow the visitor to go back and forth between the two halves of the exhibition to compare the archaeological remains with the later paintings. It was as if all these books and objects of art belonged to a single world, one of myths and fantasies, as opposed to the real world of archaeology presented earlier.

In conclusion, this exhibition's approach was very interesting but not quite as groundbreaking as expected. Behind its novel structure, it remained a fairly

traditional interpretation of Babylon, even though it opened a path for other exhibitions to follow and further. Nevertheless, the objects displayed both from and around Babylon were more than worth a visit. This was not the postmodern interpretation I expected but the immersion in all the myths (ancient and modern) created around the legendary Babylon was thoroughly enjoyable. Babylon exemplified different notions both for the artists exhibited at the end of the show, and for the archaeologists whose finds were displayed at the beginning, and the exhibition successfully showed the multiplicity of interpretations the city has generated.

As said above, the organisation of the exhibition was distinctively historical, but being presented at the Louvre, I had expected the artistic qualities of the displayed objects to have been enhanced more strikingly. Moreover, the poster advertising the exhibition had been very aesthetically attractive: it consisted of a picture of a lion against the striking blue background of the wall. This led to a small disappointment when I actually arrived to the room that displayed a small portion of this wall because, despite being the largest room of the exhibition, it was still rather small and had a low ceiling which did nothing to enhance the majesty of the wall. This sober approach might have been chosen to signal out the walls as being part of the archaeological part of the exhibition, as opposed to the mythological one. However, these majestic walls could have been shown as one possible origin for our fascination for this city. In other words, they could have been the link between the archaeological past we recovered in the first half of the exhibition, and the myths displayed in the second.